Amy Tan “Mother Tongue”

1. Amy Tan opens her essay with “I am not a scholar of English or literature” and then states, in the next paragraph, ‘I am a writer.” What is the difference? Is she appealing to ethos, logos, or pathos? Explain.
2. At several points in her essay, Tan relates anecdotes. How do they further her argument? Be sure to consider the anecdotes regarding Tan’s giving a speech, the stockbroker, the CAT scan, and Tan’s experience with the SATs. What would be the impact of omitting one of these anecdotes?
3. What is Tan’s strategy in including a direct quotation from her mother (para. 6) rather than paraphrasing what she said?
4. Tan criticizes herself twice in this essay. In paragraph 3, she quotes a speech she gave “filled with carefully wrought grammatical phrases, burdened, it suddenly seemed to me, with nominalized forms, past perfect tenses, conditional phrases.” What are nominalized forms, past perfect phrases, and conditional phrases? Why are they burdensome? At another point, Tan recalls a draft of The Joy Luck Club in which she wrote, “That was my mental quandary in its nascent state” (para 20). Why does she call this a “terrible line”?
5. Tan divides the essay into three sections. Why? If there were no breaks, would the three sections be clear?
6. Why does Tan believe that envisioning a reader---specifically, her mother--- encouraged her to write more authentically?
7. How would you describe Tan’s attitude toward her mother in this essay?
8. Discuss how Tan broadens the essay to have relevance beyond her personal experience. How does she raise issues that are germane to a group as well as to herself?